

Stepping outside our Comfort Zone
Luke 19:1-10

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we have just finished a series on forging our Christian character.

And if all has gone according to plan, and we have been cooperating with the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives in the last month – we should all be displaying our wonderful mature Christian character to each other and enjoying some rich wonderful Christian fellowship.

And that is a great blessing from the Lord.

But brothers and sisters, for as much as we forge our Christian character we must never forget that until our Lord returns – and He will return – we are not yet made complete and we must be on guard for the ways in which sin will deceive us.

So this month we are shifting our focus away from looking at ourselves and our own growth to looking at others and their needs.

Because friends as we enjoy and delight in this wonderful Christian community amongst each other, it becomes all too easy to fall into the temptation of becoming inwardly focused.

Before we know it we expect that those whom we are to make disciples ought to be seeking us out and coming to us - and we forget that the first word of Jesus' command about making disciples is to "GO."

So as we move into the summer months here at Valleyview we are going to look at what the scriptures have to say about serving others so that our inward focus is balanced by our outward focus, and we are actively seeking out the people whom our Lord Jesus is calling to Himself.

And to do that friends, we need to realize that this is going to require that we step out of our comfort zones – the places, the social circles, the routines, the habits which we have become comfortable with.

Our way of living which feels familiar, were we have the confidence that we are competent to function well and be successful in what we do.

Where we are surrounded by those who are like us - and who like us – and appreciate the same tastes and preferences that we have.

These are our comfort zones friends – and they are a good gift from God, we give Him thanks for them, but they must never be an excuse to neglect or disobey our Lord’s command to Go.

For our Lord himself demonstrated that He was willing to go, to leave behind what it meant to be God and become clothed with our humanity – to be born of a woman as Jesus the man.

Thus Paul writes in Philippians 2:5-8 that we are to have *“the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And*

being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!”

Now, I do not wish to belittle the wondrousness of the Incarnation by saying it’s just an example of Jesus leaving His comfort zone, it’s far more than that.

But... what Christ did through incarnating himself certainly does challenge our unwillingness to step out into places where we are uncomfortable... in order to continue what Jesus says he came to do in vs. 10 of our scripture reading this morning, that he came *“to seek and save the lost.”*

So let us take a closer look at what the gospel of Luke presents to us as an example of how the Word of God incarnate went about that work of seeking and saving the lost.

Luke tells us that Jesus had entered the city of Jericho and that He intended simply to pass through the city.

You see friends, in his life and ministry Jesus had spent much time out in the surrounding country with his disciples, teaching the crowds, ministry to people, performing healings and miracles.

But Jesus knew that as important as this work was – it was not enough to accomplish God’s plan, for that He need to make his way down to Jerusalem to offer his life as a sacrifice for the covenant unfaithfulness of humanity.

So in Luke 13:32-33 Jesus says *“I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.’ In any case, I must press on today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!”*

And so Jesus begins to make his way towards Jerusalem and tries to explain to the disciples why they are going there

In Luke 18:31-34 it says *“Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, “We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is*

written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be delivered over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him and spit on him; they will flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again.” The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about.”

You see friends, the disciples would understood the first part of what Jesus was talking about, with reference to the Son of Man because that was another name for the messiah, who they understood was going to deliver Israel from political oppression and destroy her enemies.

So it would make sense that the Messiah would go to Jerusalem in order to proclaim himself King and start the liberation of God’s people from there.

It didn’t make sense that Jesus as the Son of Man would go to be tortured and mocked and die... and come back to life???

But – they were Jesus’ followers... so regardless of whether they understood him or not they followed Jesus, the Son of Man, on his determined path down to Jerusalem to offer his life for ALL of humanity.

It is the ultimate mission isn’t it – Jesus on His way to Jerusalem to offer his life... so it makes sense that Jesus intends to just pass through Jericho. There were no plans to linger, to visit... to shop... or even to do some teaching and healing for the many people in this city who most certainly were in need of it – the importance of Jesus arriving in Jerusalem at the Passover was far greater.

And yet... in the midst of that bustling city, full of loyal, Torah-abiding Jewish citizens who were waiting for the Messiah to come and free them from oppression, who crowded the streets in eager expectation when they heard that Jesus was in their city – Jesus makes an unexpected stop for an opportunistic traitor, insisting that He needed to visit Zacchaeus’s home then and there.

Brothers and sisters, if you are not familiar with this story – you are most certainly familiar with the dislike that people throughout history have had for those who have to collect taxes, and even more so when that person is one of your own countrymen who is treacherously getting rich off of you by working for the occupying enemy.

And Zacchaeus was their leader...

And as such he was a bit of an opportunistic fellow – maybe he had heard a bit about this Jesus who was travelling in the countryside teaching and doing miracles – but since you can’t tax teaching and miracles, at least outside of his jurisdiction anyways - he probably hadn’t paid much attention.

So Zacchaeus is a bit late to the party when Jesus arrives in Jericho. The crowds of people have already lined the street when this comes to Zacchaeus’ attention and probably more out of sheer curiosity than anything else Zacchaeus wants to see this person, this Jesus, whom the people are so eager to see.

But, it could also very well be that Zacchaeus – being a Jew himself – was familiar with the prophecy of a messiah, the Son of Man, who would come to deliver Israel from Roman oppression.

And now that Jesus had entered a major city center Zacchaeus might have wanted see Jesus, take stock of him, determine for himself if this so-called messiah had the goods to lead a rebellion and drive out the Romans.

If Jesus did... then Zacchaeus might need to reconsider where his loyalties lay, and figure out how to switch sides.

So – since he was a short man and he could not see over the crowds of people along the road, Zacchaeus quickly moved ahead on the route through the city and found a low growing tree with sturdy branches which he could easily climb on to and have a better vantage point to take stock of this Jesus.

However, instead of Zacchaeus taking stock of Jesus, Jesus stops and takes stock of Zacchaeus.

Instead of Zacchaeus being able to determine if Jesus has the needed qualities to pull off a rebellion, Jesus determines that Zacchaeus is someone who needed to be drawn back from his own rebellion and greed and what it has done to him spiritually and socially.

So in spite of His important agenda of getting to Jerusalem to fulfill the Father's plan undeterred... Jesus pauses for this greedy, unscrupulous, traitor and insists that He fellowship with Zacchaeus right then and there.

Zacchaeus doesn't need to worry about switching sides – Jesus has recruited him, in fact Jesus' has done more than that.

Jesus' willingness to associate with him changes Zacchaeus' heart, and when the crowds of people start to protest this action by Jesus pointing out the truth about Zacchaeus, Jesus does not deny his sins – rather He has very skillfully given Zacchaeus an opportunity to admit to his sins, and make restitution for what he had done wrong.

And by the mysterious grace of God he does.

And lest anyone charge that Zacchaeus is simply being pragmatic here and is taking advantage of the opportunity to switch sides and avoid recrimination from the Messiah who will judge all traitors when He comes into power in Jerusalem, Zacchaeus goes above and beyond in his restitution.

He gives half of his possessions to the poor – an act of generosity which reveals his heart was no longer controlled by greed.

And instead of the minimum 1 and 1/5 which the Law of Moses required to be paid back for cheating and swindling someone, Zacchaeus willingly offers to pay back four times the amount.

This is no legalistic calculated move on his part – it is a genuine act of repentance – in fact Jesus considers it to be an act of faith in God's Covenant promises to be a gracious and

forgiving God because He calls Zacchaeus a son of Abraham – the one who lived by faith in God's promises.

Promises which were given and had to be accepted and received by faith because they wouldn't be fulfilled until much later on...

In calling Zacchaeus a son of Abraham, Jesus makes the point that Zacchaeus' repayment and his charity are not what restores him - as if God could be paid off, but instead that these provisions for repentance under the Law of Moses anticipate the reason Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem.

So Jesus brings the focus back to the purpose of His mission to Jerusalem, where He will pay the true cost of Zacchaeus' sins, the sins of his household – for all of Israel... for all humanity... by offering his life in their place, in our place.

And thus it is implied in what Jesus says that the Son of Man is not the kind of messiah who is coming to destroy the enemies of God and of God's people – but to reconcile them to God, to

restore them back into the family of God... and if we're talking about Abraham, we can't forget that God's intentions were to bless ALL nations through him...

So truly "the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost!" and he is willing to interrupt His all-important mission to Jerusalem, for the sake of one scandalous person who needs to experience the reality of what Jesus' mission will accomplish.

Brothers and sisters in Christ may we will be willing to allow the Holy Spirit to lead us out of our comfort zone in the same way.

As we are determined to focus in and pursue God's mission for Valleyview to make disciples through weekly worship, Valleyview 101 Classes, Christ Care Groups, Session meetings, worship band practice, youth group events and all the various activities that are a part of our discipling process...

Let us not miss those moments when the Holy Spirit brings people across our path who are in situations that our discipleship is training us and equipping us to respond to.

Let us not miss trees because we are too busy studying the forest... Let us not miss the opportunity to serve because we are too busy preparing ourselves to serve – as important as that is.

May we be sensitive and responsive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit as our Lord was – and look up and see that person in front of us, and put our important agenda on pause for a moment and say – How can I help you? How can I serve you?

And may we be given the humility to remember that we are just sinners, saved by faith in Jesus Christ – and that even this faith we have is given to us as a gift.

Because the Lord may put someone in our path who, like Zacchaeus, is well and truly an unrepentant sinner in some

way or another – and drawing close to them with the love of Jesus will bring us out of our comfort zone.

Their behavior, their lifestyle may deeply offend our wonderful Christian character... we may be worried that they will interpret our engaging with them as a tacit approval of their choices... that they will ruin our reputation because of association...or we're afraid that they might harm us because they seem dangerous...

These things might all be true friends – in fact I wouldn't be surprised if they were.

Certainly it was in the case of Zacchaeus – but that is why the Lord brings people across our path, this is why they need to encounter those who are training to make disciples, those who have experienced forgiveness, those who were once as they were... us.

Where would we be if our Lord had not willingly subjected His divine nature to take on our human nature?

Where would we be if our Lord had not left the safety and security of the countryside and turned his face towards Jerusalem?

Where would we be if our Lord was the kind of Messiah whose first coming was about judgement and retribution for our unfaithfulness?

Wherever it might be friends – it would not be comfortable.

So, let us not balk, or even consider if we will engage and serve the person whom the Lord has put in our path and drawn our attention to – let us simply, like Jesus did, draw close to them.

And brothers and sisters in Christ, this is hard for me to say because I'm all about clarity and making sure people know the truth – but as I've read about Jesus' interactions with people I've noticed that He seems to have the effect of convicting the sinners of their sins, without having to critically point it out.

The only people for whom this did not occur were those who were self-righteous.

So, it's ok to step out of our comfort zone, draw near and embrace those who are sinners as we once were – and we don't even need to get worried about pointing out all the things they are doing wrong for fear that it will get overlooked.

(I have a sneaking suspicion that plenty of other people are probably accurately pointing out their sins already)

Why? Because we are filled (or should be filled) with the Holy Spirit and empowered for this ministry just as Jesus was.

None of this “He was Jesus and we're not” stuff... We are in Christ and he is in us because Christ has sent His Holy Spirit upon us.

And the Holy Spirit's job is to convict people of their sin and point out that forgiveness is available in Jesus, and move them

to some sort of response to express their faith - like giving half of their possessions to the poor and paying back 4x what they took.

So pay attention for the people God is bringing across your path, be willing to pause your mission to do something in line with that mission, and draw near and engage with those who are outside of your comfort zone – and watch what the Holy Spirit will do in other people's lives to bring them to faith in Jesus Christ.

After all – isn't this what we are working to train for?

Let's GO – and make disciples of all nations. Amen.